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M-5 (ca. 1910) 1921

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The Bush in Mossi Country.

- 173 While these events occurred in the east, a sister of the Moro Naba, assigned to guard the tibo fetishes, quarreled with her brother and fled west to Ouahigouya. This region thus became Mossi territory and took the name of land of Ya. (2)

2. For further details, see Lt. Marc. *op. cit.*
Ch. 7, and especially Delafosse, Haut Sénégal
et Niger /Upper Senegal and Niger/, Series I,
Vol. 2, p. 305 ff.

- 131 The region thus conquered lies within the bend of the Niger, approximately between the 11°30 and 13°30 parallels and from 2° to 5° longitude west of Paris. Its closest neighbors are the Macina and the Habe to the north, the Samo to the northwest, the Gourounsi to the west and southwest, the Nancana /Nankana/ to the south, the Bousané to the southeast, the Gourmantché to the east, and the Peul of Dori to the northeast. The Mossi population has been estimated at one and a half million, to which must be added the Yarsé, who are Mandé completely assimilated to the Mossi, the pastoral Peul, the Haoussa /Hausa/ who form small colonies near the large commercial centers of the region, and a few lesser groups. We shall deal with these populations only insofar as they have contact with the Mossi, in whose territory they are scattered.

- 133 Two important rivers cross the country from northwest [Tr., the original reads northeast] to southeast. They are the two Volta rivers, the White and the Red. In addition to these two larger waterways, which nevertheless do not flow throughout the year, there are a large number of watercourses /Tr., the French term, marigot, covers both river branch channels and shallow depressions where water accumulates forming pools/. They become impassable torrents after a storm, /6/ but remain empty during the dry season from November to June. The
[312] shallow wells which supply water for the households are usually dug by the women in the beds of these watercourses.

There are no high mountains in Mossi country. When arriving from the north, the traveller crosses the beautiful cliffs of Bandiagara and the mountainous country of the Habe. /Two photographs appear here./ Mossi country begins almost at the foot of the cliffs. The northwestern region is, however, quite broken and includes the Pilimpikou peak; the two Volta rivers, especially the White Volta,

- 133 are bordered with hills. Nevertheless, it may be said that Mossi country is flat. It is covered with the classic bush of the Sudan with
[137] its small shrubs and tall grass interspersed with bastard mahogany, /7/ huge trunks of the baobabs, and tamarind and silk-cotton trees, thicker on the banks of the Volta rivers, thinner around the villages.

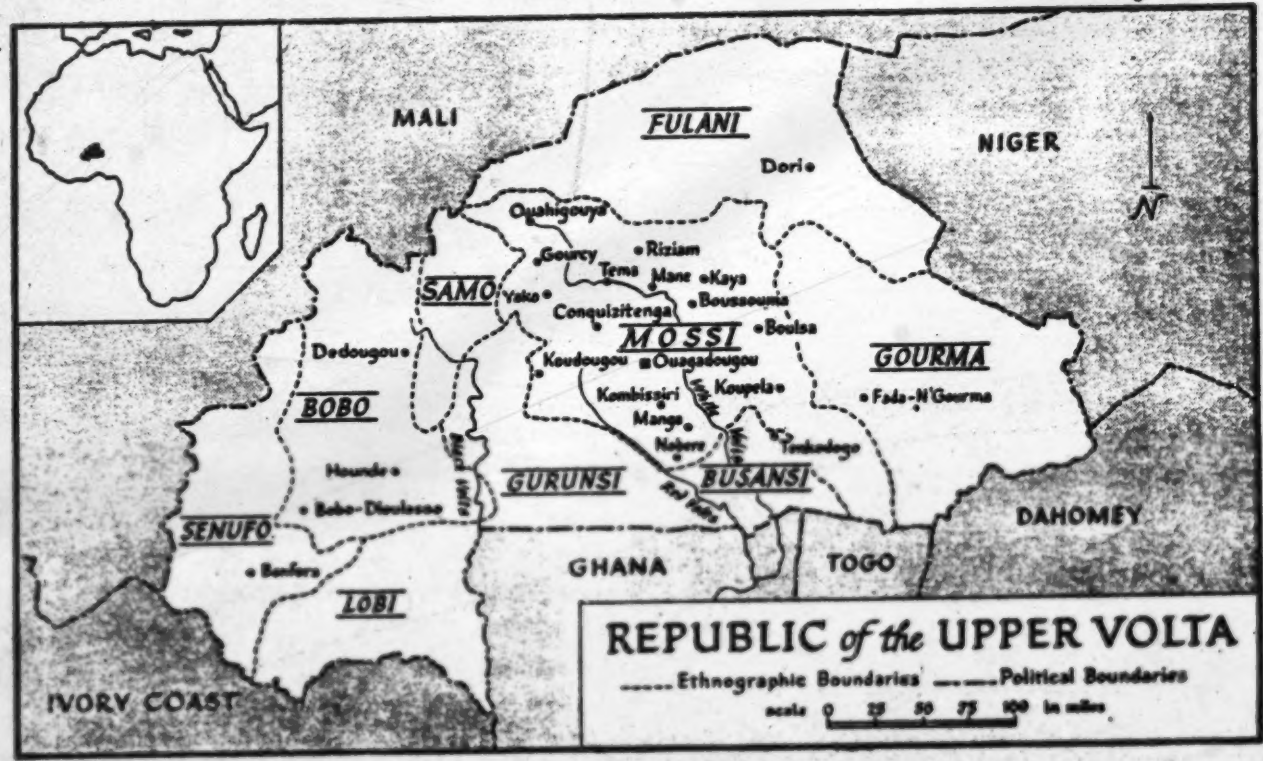
244 The country is quite fertile and easily provides for its inhabitants.
262 The various kinds of millet grow well, especially the small white variety (*Pennisetum spicatum*) which, mashed and boiled, is the staple of the diet and sorghum, or large red millet, which is used to prepare the famous beer of the country. The horses eat the latter kind, although they prefer the large white millet. Around the huts maize grows well in soil fertilized by the daily accumulation of waste. It is a welcome source of grain when the millet reserves of the previous year are running low and the current harvest has not yet matured. Maize fields are surrounded with a double row of sorghum and often
[283] with a double row of a fiber plant called berense, a sort of hemp which the natives use to make ropes. After the maize has been harvested, the field is planted with previously prepared tobacco seedlings. Finally, the sunken areas created when huts are built, as well as all slightly damp places, are planted with gombo, okra, which is highly valued as a sauce ingredient.

[311] During the rainy season no piece of land remains unused around the villages, and when the red millet ripens and the ears join across the path, passage becomes difficult. Even the hut roofs bear all kinds
[415] of calabash plants. These supply the housewives with gourds that fulfill the purposes served by our plates, dishes, glasses, and basins; the travellers with their flasks; the snuff-takers with their boxes; and the sorcerers with their spirit-calling instruments. The large gourds that are used to make drums grow among the shoots of maize. In the marshes near the watercourses where water lies stagnant, rice fields are planted, but rice is a luxury food, hard to cultivate because of
[554] the care it requires. The natives use it only on feast days or when they wish to honor a distinguished guest. Cotton is sown in damp places among the stalks of large red millet, and it is harvested much later. Peanuts and peas also take up part of the cultivated land, while beans creep along the ground between the shoots of small millet. Peppers, sesame, the indigo plant, yams, manioc, sweet potatoes, and a small

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11: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1964
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[174] functioning of early Sudanese societies. It will also attempt to demonstrate how European conquest affected the political organization of the Mossi and contributed to its ultimate decline.

The kingdom of Ouagadougou was selected as the main object of study, primarily because it emerged as the most important Mossi polity and retained this position through the greater part of Mossi history. Attention will be given to the other Mossi polities and the three other Mossi kingdoms—Yatenga, Tenkodogo, and the more remote Fada-N'Gourma, all of which resemble Ouagadougou—only insofar as they affect the history of Ouagadougou or highlight the basic nature of Mossi government.

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161 The Mossi are a Sudanese Negroid population in the new Republic of the Upper Volta.¹ They number about 2,200,000, or approximately half of the country's total population. Their ancestral territory, which they call 131 *Mogho* (land of the Mossi), covers some 30,000 square miles in the southern part of the Republic. It is a huge plateau, lying from 1,000 to 1,600 feet 133 above sea level, and broken by three low mountain ranges and numerous small hills. The Kipirsi range in the northeast has an average height of about 2,000 feet and includes the sacred mountain of the Mossi, known as Plimpikou. The Boussouma range to the east reaches a height of some 1,500 feet, and the Naouri range in the southeast is almost as high.

132 The climate of Mossi country is typical of the Sudanic zone. There are two main seasons, one cold and dry, the other hot and wet. The first begins in November with the coming of the harmattan and ends in January, the coolest month, when the average temperature is about 70° F. and the humidity about 12 per cent. The hot season extends from March to October. In July, the warmest month, the temperature reaches a high of 88° F. and the humidity 78 per cent. Violent dust storms herald the rains, which begin late in May and end in September. The rain falls almost entirely in heavy showers and thunderstorms, and the average annual fall is between 30 and 40 inches. In those years when the rainfall is about 40 inches and is regularly spaced, the Mossi can look forward to a good harvest. When the rainfall is below 30 inches and is spaced irregularly during the planting season, the threat of famine is serious. So narrow is the margin of rainfall for agriculture that in 1956 the people of one Mossi district anxiously awaited "two rains" (two showers), without which they feared that in 1957 there would be a difficult "hungry period" (the time between the exhaustion of one year's crops and the maturing of the next).

133 Mossi country is drained by only three rivers: the Black Volta with its two chief tributaries, the Sourou and the Debere, and the Red and White Voltas with their numerous small tributaries. Only the Black Volta flows

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all year round. The Red and White Voltas are important only as drainage systems during the short rainy period, for they dwindle to a string of small stagnant pools in the dry season. In some low-lying areas near the main watercourses, trapped waters provide the moisture for dank riverine vegetation. 133

The soils of Mossi country, which are typical of the Sudanic and Sahel areas, were formed chiefly by the weathering of Pre-Cambrian rocks. Ferruginous soils of varying depths, red argils, and pure silicates of aluminum predominate in the northern regions. In the south are found thin, sandy soils formed by the decomposition of crystalline rocks and sandstones. Most of these soils are eroded by torrential rains, the scouring action of the hammattan, and the incendiary action of man and nature. Even where the soils are reasonably fertile, the nature of the underlying rocks precludes important deposits of ground water. In the western sandstone region, rain filters down with such rapidity that water can be obtained only from deep wells. In the remainder of the territory, the presence of Pre-Cambrian rocks induces a rapid runoff, with the result that wells yield very little water at any depth. Rainfall collects only in river-bed pools or along dams constructed for that purpose in hollow places. The building of dams was relatively unknown in aboriginal times, and the Mossi did not practice irrigation farming. 133 241

During the dry season, Mossi country presents a picture of such utter aridity that one wonders whether it is possible for such parched red soils to produce plant life. After the first drops of rain, however, the entire plain quickly becomes covered with grasses that sometimes reach heights of five or six feet. The most characteristic and valuable trees in the region are the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), the locust-bean (*Parkia biglobosa*), the shea butter (*Butyrospermum parkii*), the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), and the kapok (*Bombax costatum*). The sole and unimportant representative of the palm family is the *Borassus aethiopicum*. There are several kinds of acacias, including the *Kenya senegalensis*, and a wide variety of silk-cotton trees, the most important of which is *Eryodendron anfractuosum*. 137

The cultivated plants of the region include numerous varieties of cereals, roots, and legumes. Several varieties of sorghum (*Sorghum vulgare*) and millet (*Pennisetum typhoides*) constitute the staple crops of the Mossi, but maize (*Zea mays*) is extremely important because it is one of the first crops to be harvested after the difficult hungry period. Peanuts, onions, rice, beans, okra, fonio, and sweet potatoes form the bulk of the other cultivated crops. Manioc is grown only in small quantities because it requires moist soil for optimum development. The Mossi grow tobacco in fields around their 241 600

CHAPTER 9

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Trade and Markets Among the Mossi People

BY ELLIOTT P. SKINNER

The Mossi represent the dominant population of the Voltaic Republic, numbering about 1,600,000 out of some 3,200,000 inhabitants. They represent the unique example of a group which has preserved its ethnic identity and political autonomy through all the vicissitudes of Sudanic history until it was conquered by the French in 1896. Tradition records that the people who became the Mossi left the Dagomba region in present-day Ghana during the eleventh century and moved into the bend of the Niger River, carving out three large kingdoms and smaller principalities in the process. At the head of these still extant kingdoms are rulers (*Moro Nabas*) who formerly held feudal-like control over the provinces, districts and villages which comprise their domains. The villages, with their patri-local, polygynous, extended family households, formed the basic Mossi settlement pattern. A complex hierarchical administrative apparatus carried the power of the Mossi rulers into the smallest villages, and funneled taxes and tribute back to them. This structure still exists, but of course it has been modified by the French.

The Mossi were and are still divided into stratified royal, noble and commoner patrilineages. Characteristic of this lineage system is a process by which royal sub-lineages descend serially until they merge with the mass of commoner lineages. Below the lineages there once were large non-Mossi groups of serfs and slaves, but these people have now been grouped into lineages and have become Mossicized.

The topography of Mossi country is typical of the Sudanic grasslands. It is an immense plain, some 1,500 feet above sea level and broken only by three low mountain ranges and numerous small hills. The annual total rainfall is between 30 and 40 inches, and falls almost entirely as heavy showers or thundershowers during the period from June to September. So narrow is the margin of rainfall for successful crop cultivation that any variation in the cycle results in low crop yields and a difficult "hungry period" the following year before the new crops are harvested. The Mossi do not practice irrigation, and would have trouble doing so because the three Volta Rivers which drain their territory serve as drainage chiefly during the rainy season. Only the Black Volta has water all year round; the

- 133 Red and White Voltas are merely a series of small stagnant pools during the dry season. In some low-lying areas around the main water courses, trapped water provides the moisture for dank riverine vegetation.

134 The soils of Mossi country are mainly ferruginous with red argils and pure silicates of aluminum predominating in the northern region.

The soils in the south are thin, sandy, and formed from the decomposition of crystalline rocks and sandstones. During the dry season the Mossi landscape appears too sterile to produce plant life, but with the first drops of rain the entire country soon becomes covered with the grasses and shrubs which are characteristic of this Sudanese region. The uncultivated but valuable trees of this area include the

137 Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), the locust bean (*Parkia biglobosa*), the shea-butter (*Butyrospermum parkii*), the tamarind (*Tamarindus*

241 *indica*) and the kapok (*Bombax costatum*). The plants which the Mossi cultivate include varieties of cereals, roots and legumes. Sorghums (*Sorghum vulgare*) and millets (*Pennisetum typhoides*) are their staples, with maize (*Zea mays*) filling the role of a secondary but rather useful crop because its growing cycle is shorter than that of other important crops and it breaks the "hungry period." Maize would be a more important crop to the Mossi if it could grow on soil less fertile than what is normally available around the Mossi compound—the area where it brings the greatest yield. Peanuts, onions,

240 rice, beans, okra, peas and sweet potatoes are other food crops. Tobacco is grown for local consumption, but the crops which have the greatest export value are cotton and indigo, used for making cloth and dyeing it.

224 The wild fauna of the country does not provide a major part of the food needs of the Mossi people. The several species of deer and antelope, monkeys, rabbits and wild pig are hunted and used for food.

136 But the elephants and lions which are also found in the country are sources of great distress to the people because the former decimate the growing crops and the latter attack and kill the grazing animals.

231 The Mossi rear two main types of cattle: a zebu-like one in the northern regions and a small dwarf variety in the south. These animals are kept primarily for their milk and for export, and are seldom killed

231 for meat until they are very old. The animals which provide the Mossi with meat are goats, sheep, chickens and guinea fowls. Pig-

177 raising is not widespread and seems to be declining in importance with the increasing observance of Islamic food taboos, even among

262 people who are still pagan. Fish forms only a minor part of the Mossi diet and is obtained mainly from traders rather than from local activities.

231 The Mossi also rear donkeys and horses for which they have